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ABSTRACT

A replication of earlier research, this study investigates the relationship between moral reasoning and classroom conduct. According to Kohlberg (1978), children who reason at preconventional levels (Stages 1 and 2) would be likely to disrupt a classroom, while children who reason at the conventional levels (Stages 3 and 4) should cause less classroom disruption. Bear and Richards (1981) found that conduct problems declined monotonically (almost linearly) with advances in moral reasoning for a sample of middle class Iowa fourth graders. These findings were consistent with theoretical expectations. In this replication of Bear and Richard's study, 87 fourth, sixth, and eighth graders from lower class homes in rural western Virginia were assessed according to Kohlberg's interviewing procedure. Classroom behavior was assessed by teacher reports on the Conduct Scale of the Behavior Problem Checklist. In most respects, results accorded well with the views of Kohlberg and replicate those of Bear and Richards. Level of moral reasoning increased with age, and conduct ratings were strongly influenced by sex and social class. However, the predicted monotonic trend between moral reasoning and conduct emerged only for boys; low-reasoning girls exhibited few behavior problems. (Author/CB)

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Moral Reasoning and Classroom Conduct: A Replication

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Running Head: Moral Reasoning and Conduct

Abstract

The primary purpose of the study is to replicate earlier research by Bear and Richards (1981) in which moral reasoning was found to be monotonically related to classroom conduct. 87 fourth, sixth, and eighth graders, 42 boys and 45 girls, were assessed for their level of moral reasoning using Kohlberg's interviewing procedures. These same children were rated by teachers on classroom conduct. Results replicated those of Bear and Richards for boys, but not for girls. Contrary to what might be expected on the basis of Kohlberg's theory alone, low reasoning girls exhibited few behavior problems. The results were interpreted from a social learning perspective.

Moral Reasoning and Classroom Conduct: A Replication

Lawrence Kohlberg's (e.g., 1978) theory of moral development is intriguing in that intentions rather than consequences of behavior are evaluated. Kohlberg envisions moral development as a series of hierarchical stages that emerge in an invariant order. Since such stages represent cognitive structures rather than the content of moral thinking, he distinguishes sharply between moral judgments and moral behaviors. Behavioral choice, therefore, is seen only as an indirect consequence of stage of moral reasoning. Indirect or not, however, Kohlberg's theory holds that moral development should exert a powerful influence on behavior, behavior that can be observed in a variety of settings. Consequently, there have been many studies which relate moral reasoning to objectively measured behaviors. In a comprehensive review of 75 such studies, Blasi (1980) found that most investigators reported significant relationships between moral judgments and behaviors.

In recent years, we have become interested in the relationship between stage of moral development and classroom conduct. According to Kohlberg, children who reason at preconventional levels (Stages 1 and 2) have an orientation toward satisfying their own needs with little regard for others. Although they may be aware of how their actions impinge on others, such children are likely to have little interest in conventional standards of conduct expected in the classroom. Preconventional youngsters would likely disrupt a classroom whenever such

behaviors suited their own needs or whenever they perceived external sanctions to be weak or not enforced.

In contrast to their lower reasoning counterparts, children who reason at the conventional level (Stages 3 and 4) are oriented toward pleasing others and maintaining the social order. Since such children are inclined to support rules likely to be operating in traditional classrooms, they should cause less classroom disruption and display fewer conduct problems from a teacher's point of view.

The relationship between stages of moral reasoning and classroom conduct was investigated by Bear and Richards (1981) in a study of Iowa fourth graders. Consistent with theoretical expectations, they found that conduct problems declined monotonically (almost linearly) with advances in moral reasoning. The observed decline was evident even after the effects of sex, social class, and IQ were controlled statistically. The primary purpose of the current investigation is to determine if these findings can be replicated with children of varying ages who are culturally different from the predominantly middle class Iowa sample. A secondary purpose of the study is to see if the link between conduct and moral development is similar for boys and girls.

Subjects

The initial sample contained 163 students, approximately equal numbers of boys and girls, who were attending fourth, sixth, and eighth grade classes at two elementary schools and one high school

in a rural county of western Virginia. In order to insure sufficient variability on the independent variable, a prescreening of the initial sample was made. After screening, 87 students, 42 boys and 45 girls, remained in the study. There were 30 fourth, 29 sixth, and 28 eighth graders. On the basis of parent occupation data, we determined that these children were predominantly from lower class homes, although all socioeconomic levels were represented. All were white.

Procedure

We followed procedures that were nearly identical to those described by Bear and Richards (1981). Prior to an individual assessment of moral reasoning, potential subjects were screened through a group administration of standard moral dilemmas. Joseph Harris, a University of Virginia graduate student, read aloud the instructions, dilemmas, and related questions to groups of children in their classrooms. He scored the protocols and used the results to select subjects for further study. The purpose of the screening was to choose a sample with as many stages of moral reasoning represented as possible.

Harris then interviewed each of the 87 selected children according to instructions contained in Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview, Form A (Kohlberg, Colby, Gibbs, & Speicher-Dubin, 1978). Interviews were recorded and typed transcripts prepared. Following instructions in the Kohlberg manual, he generated two types of scores: (a) moral maturity scores which can (theoretically) range from 100 (pure Stage 1 reasoning)

to 600 (pure Stage 6); (b) Major and minor stage designations. By way of explanation, major stage designations are used to indicate predominant level of moral thinking; minor stage designations (indicated by numbers in parentheses) are used with respondents who verbalize at least 20% of their moral reasoning at stages other than their major one. For example, 3(2) represents someone whose major stage is 3 and minor stage is 2. Twelve protocols were randomly selected for scoring by an independent judge. The interjudge correlation for the moral maturity scores was .94.

Classroom behaviors were assessed by teachers using the Conduct Scale of the Behavior Problem Checklist (Quay & Peterson, 1981). Teachers rated these behaviors at about the same time as the moral development interviews were conducted, and were not aware of the results of the interviews or prescreening assessment.

Results and Conclusion

Unlike the Bear and Richards study of fourth graders, the current sample included three grade levels. Therefore, it was possible to test for age (grade) effects. We grouped the subjects according to grade in school and conducted a trend analysis on the moral maturity scores. In accordance with Kohlberg's theory, a significant ($p < .001$) linear trend upward was detected across grades. We also tested for a similar effect on conduct problems, but no such trend was observed. Since conduct did not improve monotonically with grade, we did not control for grade in subsequent analyses. When the data were grouped

according to sex and social class, no significant effects were found for moral maturity, but both these variables were significantly linked to conduct problems. Boys displayed more conduct problems than girls, and lower class youngsters more than middle or upper.

In order to replicate the Bear and Richards finding that conduct problems decline monotonically with stage of moral reasoning, subjects were grouped into "stage-types" according to major and minor stage designations. With the exception of finding seven Stage 1 subjects (none were found in the Iowa sample), the proportions of youngsters within stage-types were remarkably similar to those found in the earlier research. To optimize conditions for replication, the seven low reasoning subjects were removed from the data. We then conducted a trend analysis (the independent variable being stage-type) on the conduct ratings. The results not only failed to replicate the monotonic trend found in Iowa, but suggested that the relationship between increasing stage-type and conduct might be curvilinear. We then divided the data according to sex and repeated the trend analysis for boys and girls independently. The predicted monotonic trend emerged for boys ($p < .05$), but not for girls.

In most respects, our findings accord well with the views of Kohlberg and replicate those of Bear and Richards (1981). As in the Iowa study, conduct ratings were strongly influenced by sex and social class. It was also found that children who reason at higher moral levels, be they boys or girls, exhibit few conduct problems. But

our most fascinating discovery follows from what was not found--girls who reasoned at preconventional levels did not exhibit more conduct problems than their higher reasoning counterparts. Boys, on the other hand, behaved as theory would predict.

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